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Arabic Language Courses for Students at the Faculty of Law UKM - Importance and Challenges

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Abstract

One of the objectives of Law Faculty of National University of Malaysia known as *Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia* (henceforth UKM) is to produce trained and capable graduates in multiple fields of law and practice, including Islamic law. UKM uses two medium of instruction in teaching; Malay language and English. Arabic language is not directly used in teaching law students but they will be exposed to Arabic terms and references in Islamic law courses. In four years of study, students of the Law Faculty at UKM have to sit for 8 Islamic law courses such as Introduction to Islamic Law, Islamic Criminal Law, Islamic Family Law, Islamic Jurisprudence and Evidence and Procedures in the *Syariah* Court. To enable the students to master the Islamic law courses, they have to learn the Arabic language in 3 semesters within the first two years of their study. Many questions have been posed as to the relevance of studying the Arabic language for students in Faculty of Law at UKM. This paper serves to answer such questions. The purpose of this paper is to explain the importance of teaching Arabic language to the students of Law Faculty UKM. A brief overview of the implementation of teaching Arabic to the law students in UKM is provided. The relevance of studying Arabic language is explained and discussed. This paper also identifies some of the challenges faced in teaching Arabic to law students especially to the non-Muslims. The paper concludes with some recommendations for future improvement.

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1. Introduction

Language is an important tool in any course in the academic journey. The mastering of four language skills; reading, writing, speaking and listening is crucial for all students. These skills will enable the students to understand their studies, to communicate their thoughts, either orally or in writing and to enhance their knowledge in their particular field of study. For law students in UKM, besides Malay language and English, it is compulsory for them to learn the Arabic language. This policy has been established since the first intake of students to the Law Faculty in 1986. However, recently, students and university administrators have questioned the relevance of studying Arabic for law students in UKM.

Hence, the purpose of this paper is to explain the importance of teaching Arabic language to undergraduate students of the Law Faculty in UKM, to identify challenges in teaching Arabic language to undergraduate law students and to propose some recommendations for future improvement.

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This paper begins with a brief overview of the Law Faculty, UKM, the position of Arabic Language Courses vis-à-vis the entire legal syllabus and the importance of learning the Arabic language for law students in UKM. Following that, the components of the Arabic courses will be discussed. The paper ends with some recommendations.

2. The Development of Faculty of Law at UKM

The Faculty of Law at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia was established on 1st February, 1984 with the intake of 36 students; all being enrolled to the Law Matriculation programme. In the 1986/87 session, the faculty started its undergraduate programme when all the 36 students were admitted to Year 1. In 1989, the faculty received official recognition from the Qualifying Board established under the Legal Profession Act 1976. The first batch of graduates was produced in 1990. In 1996, the faculty obtained the approval from the Ministry of Education to initiate its postgraduate programmes, both Masters and PhD of Law.

The faculty's mission is to become an entity which is successful in producing legal professionals with excellent knowledge, ethics, appearance and personality within the framework of the national culture. It also aims to produce well trained and skilled graduates in various fields of law and practice, including the Islamic Law. The degree offered by the Law Faculty is Bachelor of Law with Honours. The minimum period of study is 8 semesters and the maximum is 12.

The entrance to the Law Faculty of UKM prior to 1998 was via matriculation. At the matriculation level, students studied introductory courses to legal studies, Arabic language and English. This matriculation was under UKM's administration. However, beginning the year 1999, Law matriculation under UKM was abolished. The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia centralized all matriculation programmes to be administered under the Ministry with exception for International Islamic University Malaysia and University of Malaya. Therefore, the main pathway to the Law Faculty of UKM for undergraduate students is through Matriculation under the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (also known as Matrikulasi KPM).

Currently, there are several ways through which students enter the Law Faculty of UKM. The first is through matriculation under the Ministry of Education, second, through law matriculation under UiTM and third, through good results in STAM (Higher Certificate of Islamic Religious Studies Malaysia) or STPM (Higher Certificate of Education). The drawback that the Law Faculty of UKM faces in taking students from these ways are the fact that they are not adequately equipped with the level of knowledge required to undertake legal studies. For example, students from the matriculation under the Ministry of Education do not study basic law subjects nor is their level of language proficiency (Malay, English or Arabic) adequate for them to master law subjects they study during their first year. Another example is the courses studied by the students in UiTM Law Matriculation which are not tailored specifically for students who enter legal studies. The courses are tailored to enable students to undertake social sciences studies such as political science and public administration. Therefore, they are not required to study Arabic language (which is compulsory for UKM law students in their first year) and the level of their language proficiency is not as high as required by the Law Faculty. In addition, the language syllabus for Law students UKM has not been revised after the Law Matriculation was abolished in year 1999.

All these factors have caused difficulties for students when they enter their first year in UKM especially in learning the Arabic language which is compulsory for all law students in UKM. All students of the Law Faculty at UKM are required to enrol for Arabic courses in three consecutive semesters. The components of courses that are compulsory for first and second year students are as follows:

Year 1

First Semester

UUUK1011	-	Law and Information Technology
UUUK1013	-	Administrative and Constitutional Law I
UUUK1053	-	Introduction to Malaysian Legal System I
UUUK1073	-	Law of Contract I
ZT1054	-	Self Development I
SKVA2552	-	Preparatory Arabic Language
ZZZE1162	-	English for Law
HK	-	Co-curriculum

Second Semester

UUUK1023	-	Administrative and Constitutional Law II
UUUK1063	-	Introduction to Malaysian Legal System II
UUUK1083	-	Law of Contract II
UUUK1113	-	Introduction to Islamic Law

ZT1054	-	Self Development
SKVA2562	-	Arabic I for Faculty of Law
HK	-	Co-curriculum

Year 2

First Semester

UUUK2053	-	Criminal Law I
UUUK2073	-	Family Law
UUUK2093	-	Law of Tort I
UUUK2113	-	Islamic Criminal Law
SKVA2572	-	Arabic II for Faculty of Law
ZT2163	-	Islamic Civilization (either in first semester or second semester)
ZT2173	-	Ethnic Relations (either in first semester or second semester)
HK	-	Co-curriculum

3. Components of Arabic language course

The students in the Faculty of Law are required to take three levels of Arabic language namely Preparatory Arabic, Arabic I for the Faculty of Law and Arabic II for the Faculty of Law. The uniqueness of the Faculty of Law at UKM is that it is the only faculty in UKM that offers Arabic language to its students regardless of their ethnic and religious background (Ashinida Aladdin 2012). Preparatory Arabic is undertaken by the students in the first semester of Year One. This course is specially designed for non-Muslims students who have no background at all in Arabic language. After undertaking this course, the students will move to Arabic 1 for the Faculty of Law in the second semester of Year One; and finally to Arabic 2 for the Faculty of Law in the first semester of Year Two. In order to get the degree, the students must pass all Arabic language examinations. However, the students are allowed to re-take the examinations for Arabic language courses if they fail.

The contact hours are four hours per week for fourteen weeks which make fifty six contact hours per semester. The assessment is based on the objective of the particular course which usually includes language learning skills i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing. Following is the course description and course objective for the three compulsory Arabic courses offered to the students at the Faculty of Law, UKM:

3.1 Preparatory Arabic for Faculty of Law

This is a preparatory course offered to the first year students of the Faculty of Law especially to non-Muslims and Muslims who have no exposure at all in reading and writing in Arabic. It aims to offer knowledge and guidance to the students to recognize Arabic alphabet by introducing the phonetic systems of the Arabic alphabet, the writing techniques and the diacritics systems. The students will be exposed to the transliteration method at the beginning in order to guide them in reading Arabic words and phrases. At the end of the course, they will be able to read Arabic words and phrases without transliteration and apply the writing technique well. The learning outcomes for Preparatory Arabic are as follows:

- To recognize the Arabic letters
- To be able to pronounce and read according to the Arabic phonetics
- To be able to write the Arabic letters in single form and in connected form
- To be able to write Arabic words precisely

3.2 Arabic I for Faculty of Law

This course offers knowledge, understanding and the application of basic Arabic grammar which includes nouns and verbs. Students will be taught the classifications of nouns and verbs as well as the basic concept of grammar such as *muzakkar*, *muannath*, *mufrad*, *muthanna*, *jama'*, *fi'ilmadhi* and how they are used in sentences. The students will be exposed to short texts and dialogues in different situations. The learning outcomes for this course are as follows:

- The students are able to listen and participate in basic Arabic conversation, either by writing or speaking
- The students are capable of reading and answering basic Arabic comprehension
- The students are able to use Arabic vocabulary and grammar in building basic sentence
- The students are able to deliver and explain a topic using basic grammatical Arabic language structure, either through speaking or writing

3.3 Arabic II for Faculty of Law

This is an extended course and is offered to the students who have taken and passed SKVA2562. The aim of the course is to improve their knowledge and understanding of basic Arabic grammar. Students will be taught further the classifications of nouns, particles and verbs i.e. *fi'ilmudhari'* and *fi 'il al-amr* and how they are used in sentences. Students are taught reading and comprehension of texts of various genres and speaking practices through dialogues. Students will be introduced to some terminologies of Islamic legislative. Audio CDs and relevant web-sites will be used to enhance the teaching and learning process. At the end of the course, students will be able to understand some grammar aspects, to read, understand and translate the text, write sentences and interact in given situations. The following are the learning outcomes for the course:

- The students are able to listen and answer simple Arabic conversation, either in writing or speaking
- The students are able to read and answer simple Arabic comprehension texts
- The students are able to use Arabic vocabulary and grammar to build easy Arabic sentence structures
- The students are able to deliver and explain a topic using simple grammatical sentences, either in writing or speaking

4. The Importance of Arabic Language for Students of Faculty of Law at UKM

Arabic language plays an important role for law students in UKM. Learning Arabic language assists the students in understanding terminologies found in Islamic law subjects which form part of the syllabus for undergraduate law students. Islamic law subjects form almost 30% of the total subjects undertaken by undergraduate law student in Law Faculty UKM. Islamic law subjects include Introduction to Islamic Legal System, Islamic Criminal Law, Islamic Family Law, Transaction in Islamic Law, Islamic Banking and Finance, Islamic Jurisprudence, *Syariah* Court Evidence and Procedure. Many Arabic terms are used in these subjects. Therefore, learning the Arabic language provides an exposure to the students on the context and usage of the language in Islamic law.

The second reason why teaching Arabic language is important to law students in UKM, is because Islamic law is part of the Malaysian legal system. Consequently, any law student has to have a certain level of knowledge and understanding of Islamic law for Muslims in Malaysia. Many of the primary sources and major references for Islamic law are written in the Arabic language. Thus, it is important for the students to know the Arabic language in order to enable them to make references to the Arabic legal text.

Malaysia is trying to maintain its position as a leading nation in Islamic banking and finance. To fulfil the domestic needs of consumers, most banks have established Islamic counters to offer Islamic banking products and services either to Muslims or non-Muslims. For that reason, as future legal practitioners, law students must have a certain level of knowledge relating to Islamic banking and finance which is rooted in Arabic language.

Furthermore, Malaysia is aiming to position itself as the world *halal* hub. Many food manufacturers are non-Muslims. To comply with JAKIM, as the owner of the *halal* trademark, companies have to employ legal officers who are well-versed in *Syariah* principle and Islamic law in Malaysia. This is the opportunity for law students from UKM to fill in the vacancies. Having additional knowledge in the Arabic language, especially for the non-Muslims, would give them a better advantage as compared to those who did not learn the Arabic language. They would be able to understand the Islamic law terminologies (usually in Arabic) and comprehend the discussion conducted by Islamic religious officers pertaining to the principles of permissibility for Muslims.

Learning a foreign language other than English and Malay language is an advantage and produces versatile students who are able to communicate in several different languages. For law students, mastering the Arabic language will give them a better edge in the legal world where they can understand Arabic terms that are widely used in Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic banking and finance, as well as the *halal* industry.

5. Current Challenges and Recommendations for Improvement

Based on the discussion above, this paper identifies some of the current problems faced in teaching Arabic for UKM Law students. The first major problem is inadequate allocation of time to study the Arabic language. Previously, with the existence of Law Matriculation specifically for UKM Law students, the students have more time to familiarize themselves with the Arabic language. After the abolishment of the Law Matriculation of UKM, the syllabus for Arabic language has not been revised to cater for the new group of students who are not adequately exposed to legal studies especially for non-Muslim students. Having sufficient time to get acquainted with the Arabic language is very important to enable the students to relate and to apply the Arabic language in the law subjects they study. The second problem is the perception of law students

towards learning the Arabic language. Some students find studying Arabic language as burdensome. This is due to the fact that the students were not given explicit explanation about the objective of the compulsory nature of learning Arabic for law students in UKM (Ashinida Aladdin 2012). In addition, the course description and learning outcomes for Arabic language courses cannot be found in the Undergraduate Students' Handbook of the Faculty of Law instead, the Arabic course description can only be found in the Undergraduate Student's Handbook of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM. This may be due to the lack of communication between the Faculty of Law and the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities UKM. As a result, evidently when the students do not have a clear picture of the purpose of studying the Arabic language, they hold a negative perception towards studying the Arabic language.

6. Recommendation and Conclusion

This paper recommends the following in order to overcome some of the problems in teaching Arabic language to the students of law at Faculty of Law, UKM. First, there is a need to re-establish specific matriculation for UKM law students to provide them with adequate proficiency in the Arabic language. The second recommendation is to utilize problem-based learning methods in teaching Arabic for law students by using the texts referred to in teaching Islamic law courses. This may be useful to the students so that they can apply their knowledge in the language to their Islamic law subjects. The third suggestion is to increase Arabic language proficiency level for law students who intend to take the Diploma in *Syariah* Legal Practice offered by the Faculty of Islamic Studies. This would enable the students to master Arabic text, thus becoming better *Syariah* court lawyers. To conclude, Arabic language is not a language for Malay and Muslim only. With the challenge of globalization and the open market for legal profession in Malaysia, it is important for UKM to produce well-rounded and versatile students who are adaptable to any situation. Teaching and learning Arabic language for students of law at UKM regardless of their ethnic and religious background is one of the ways to do so.

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